

NOTED AUTHOR TALKS

Alfred Henry Lewis' Picture
of the President.

LIKE SHERIFF AND HIS GUN

Says Roosevelt Seems the Beaten
Path—He Tells Why New York Has
No Reading Public and Discusses
"The Great American Novel,"
Fascinating Story by a Soldier.

Alfred Henry Lewis, the author, spent all of last week in Washington visiting the President and other friends. Since Mr. Lewis changed his base of brilliant activities from Washington to New York, his fame as a writer has spread round the world. His weekly literary output probably exceeds that of any living writer of English, and his readers perhaps outnumber those of any other person whose sole occupation is that of writing.

His Washington friends note no change in his aspect or his bearing toward the world. Fame and flattery have not given him a different viewpoint from that which he occupied when in Washington for years as an enterprising and alert newspaper correspondent he was "Al" Lewis to his contemporaries. In the eight years that have passed since he has been a resident of New York he has become what may be properly called an institution of the metropolis. By his



Alfred Henry Lewis.

untiring and voluminous literary work he has made himself a weekly feature of the life of New York and the nation.

His fine residence on Washington Heights, overlooking the majestic Hudson, contains \$50,000 worth of pictures and a library of 6,000 volumes, which represent not only his tastes, but likewise the earning capacity of his prodigious industry in a field of labor that is strewn with the wrecks of so many others who have entered it and striven in vain for success.

Hard to Interview.

Because of his angular, clean-cut personality, Mr. Lewis is one of the most difficult notabilities of the time adequately to interpret in an interview. Not that he is unwilling to talk on any subject that interests him or that he is averse to being quoted, but that his views are so original, so unconventional, his method of expression so habitually characteristic, and his manner so aggressive that the effort of any one save himself properly to present his views is extremely hard. It is agreed among those who know him best and have known him longest that he talks better than he writes. If scores of the observations he makes on the men and manners of the time in casual conversation should be, or even could be, presented by his listeners just as they come from his lips, steaming with his pugnacious energy and clothed in his striking metaphors, the power and originality of the man would be more fully understood.

Mr. Lewis was asked by a representative of The Herald for some opinions on American literature. His response swept like a cyclone over every theme of contemporary interest, from President Roosevelt to the latest movement in the stock market.

Discusses the President.

"In considering Roosevelt," he said, "I begin by viewing him as a friend of mine in my cowboy days, viewed the sheriff—he couldn't tell how much was sheriff and how much was gun. There is this, however, about Theodore Roosevelt that distinguishes him from every President of the Republic's latter days—he is unconventional, which means that he does his own thinking in his own way. If in his hurrying movements he should find himself on the beaten path you could bet that he would jump out of it with celerity and regret, and skip back onto the grass. The sign, 'Keep Off the Grass,' has no terrors for him. Which reminds me that anybody who wants to live by the sword and torture of his soul—meaning thereby the writing business, or what you are pleased to call literature—he must make up his mind not to keep off the grass. It's a business in which nobody can succeed by imitating anybody else. The least useful worker in it is he who is employed for a wage to 'criticise' the product of other men's brains. For who can say what is a good book, and what a poor, bad or indifferent book? My activities in that end of the business begin and end with my own appreciation of the work.

I do not undertake to judge whether or not it will please my neighbor, any more than I would undertake to choose for you at this moment what you might wish to eat from this huge bill of fare that lays before us in this cafe. Hence, I am convinced that there are as many good volumes unpublished as have ever been reeled off the press at the approval of somebody hired for a wage to pass upon the merits of offerings that are sent to the publishers.

"Company H."

"Why, do you know that one of the best books, one of the most fascinating stories, I ever read was written by a private soldier in the Confederate army, and is called 'Company H.' Whoever the author was—and I can't now recall his name—did his own thinking and his own writing, without any thought of pleasing anybody else. He simply told the things that he saw and felt as a member of Company H, and what he tells about Bragg and Longstreet, Joe Johnston, and Kirby Smith, &c., makes one of the best books ever written about the civil war. And 'Company H' is literature—American literature, if so you prefer to call it, though I don't hear that sort of talk about pictures and architecture and whatnot of achievement that involves the operations of the thinking machinery of the human race. From my viewpoint literature is just literature, whether it come from Europe, Asia, Africa, America, Australia, or the islands of the sea. Wherefore, then, should we prate so much about the great American novel yet to be written? Is there a great English novel, or a great French novel, or a great German novel? When anybody shall point out to me the great novel that is strictly English, or German, or French, or Chinese, or Scandinavian, I will then look around for somebody to write the great American novel."

Wants Government Supervision.

Mr. Lewis jumped from this line of talk to the novel proposition that since the Federal government is undertaking to do nearly everything for the people, it ought now to essay the task of regulating their literary consumption. "We are beginning to tell the people what they ought to eat and drink and wear," said he, "then why not tell them what they ought to read? At any rate, I would like to see the government here at Washington keep as close tab on the country's literary production and consumption as upon its agricultural, manufacturing, and mining production and consumption. Whoso reads a book or an editorial or a story is influenced some. That influence may not be much, but it is enough to affect his manner of thinking, and therefore his conduct. Now, if the government should carefully compile statistics on the number of volumes turned out by the presses of this country every year, together with the titles of the publications, the names of the writers or authors, and the number of every publication sold, we could soon get at things that are going on in the minds of the people. We want to protect their physical health and their pocketbooks; then why not give some attention to their thinking apparatus?"

Will Not Give Advice.

There is one thing Mr. Lewis will not do. He will not indulge either in preachments or advice about literature. Hence, there is no use for the ambitious young writer to ask him for advice as to methods of work or habits of study. He has and knows of only one method of work, and that is to keep at the task without rest or variability when once it is undertaken, and as to habits of study, he is not aware that he has any. He is an inveterate reader of the popular old masters of English literature, especially Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray, and Stevenson he reads in. "It may not sound complimentary to my contemporaries," said he, "when I tell you that I don't read any of them. My reason for this is not that I don't think they would entertain me highly if I should read them, but because I am afraid if I do that I will unconsciously crib from them. When a man is dead he is defenseless in the writing business, and you can steal from him, consciously or unconsciously, without the dread of his kicking; but if you steal from a live author, then the Lord have mercy on your soul, for he will bound you to your grave. Nobody, of course, intends to steal from another writer, but the human mind is so susceptible to impressions that a more or less reprehensible form of plagiarism is almost unavoidable. I am not aware that I crib either in the slightest the thoughts or the language of any of the authors whose works I read, but I dare say that a close scrutiny would sometimes show that the thought that had at first gone through the brain and been clothed in the words of somebody else emerges from mine onto paper in a garb very similar to the original. I see this in the work of other men, and I am not egotistical enough to think myself exempt from a frailty common to humanity."

No Home Life in New York.

Mr. Lewis knows his New York thoroughly, and, therefore, what he says about the metropolis as a reading community has the stamp of authority. "New York proper, that is, Manhattan Island," said he, "reads less than any other part of the country. The reason is that there are no homes in New York—no home life. The eagles and the buzzards there live in aeries, and the rats and mice live in holes in the ground. That is to say, they sleep in these places, and because these are the only sleeping places they have they go to bed as late as possible. Therefore, they have neither time nor place for reading. They scann the headlines of the big morning and afternoon papers, and this satisfies their appetite for reading. It is this that accounts for the atrocious system of headlining in the New York papers that make money. If New York were a city of yards, like Philadelphia or Washington, its consumption of literature would be immense, because of its huge population. But the people there, as I said before, have no homes—only places to sleep—hence they have no opportunity to read. They are forced to live in the streets, in the cafes, in the theaters, in street cars, river boats, &c., and this manner of living is not conducive to the reading habit. Why, if the proportion of readers in New York were as great as it is in Philadelphia, for example, it would be the greatest literary market in the world. The building regulations of Philadelphia wisely compel provision for yard space around living places, either front or back, or side, and this affords the people of that city an opportunity to build homes, where they go because it is comfortable and where they read because they are quiet."



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